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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5824

INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 9377

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6713

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1337

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 5226

RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 1566

RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 6106

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000206

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/27/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR ECON ETRD KJUS KCRM TH

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND CROWN PRINCE DISCUSS POLITICS,  
BILATERAL TIES, KING'S HEALTH, ARMS TRAFFICKER EXTRADITION

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) The Ambassador had a private New Year's audience with Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn for 45 minutes at the Amporn Palace in Bangkok on January 26. The Crown Prince's consort, Princess Srirasmi, also attended.

Political Scene

¶2. (C) The Crown Prince noted it was clear to the Thai public that the Ambassador had been quite active in 2008, particularly during the political crisis of the past six months. The Ambassador's interest in Thailand was seen as very positive, and it was good that he was seen meeting with politicians and others from across the political spectrum, both in Bangkok and in the provinces. Only by doing so can one get "the true story" about politics in Thailand. The Crown Prince said that it was essential that the King remained silent throughout the political crisis. To have done anything else would have not been proper, and would have damaged the Monarchy. In response to the Ambassador's comment that the King looked much healthier over the past month, the Crown Prince agreed, and said that his father had been rather sick in December. The King's sister's cremation ceremony in November, the political upheaval and the airport takeover all had taken their toll. With those burdens lifted, the King was in much better spirits now.

Economic Engagement

¶3. (C) The Crown Prince said that the U.S. and global economic situations certainly would have a negative impact on the Thai economy, but he was confident that the situation would quickly rebound - "These things go in cycles." The Ambassador noted that our bilateral economic relationship remained vitally important for both countries. American investment was slowing down in Thailand, but more as a consequence of an overall drop in U.S. investment in the region, rather than because of conditions in Thailand. The U.S. would like to be able to increase exports to Thailand, however, and would be exploring ways to do so, including the potential sale of Boeing aircraft to Thai Airways this year. The Crown Prince, an avid pilot, said that he still flew a Boeing 737 for Thai Airways occasionally.

¶4. (C) The Crown Prince said he was pleased that the Ambassador and Mrs. John were so visible in the Thai media, particularly on university campuses and with nongovernmental groups, since it was important for a new generation of Thais to learn the value of a strong and close relationship with the United States. "Our generation grew up in the Vietnam War, and easily understood the strategic importance of having a strong alliance with the U.S." The Ambassador responded that the military alliance remained vital to the U.S., particularly for force projection, live-fire training, and multilateral military exercise capabilities. Next month's Cobra Gold exercises were a case in point. The Crown Prince enthusiastically agreed, adding that it was important that both Thais and Americans understood that.

Viktor Bout

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¶5. (C) The Ambassador raised the case of Viktor Bout, the accused arms trafficker in detention in Bangkok awaiting extradition to the United States. This case is extremely important to the U.S., given that Bout worked closely with known terrorists plotting to kill Americans. Extraditing him would be important for the continued high level of law enforcement cooperation we have. President Bush raised the case directly with Prime Minister Samak in Bangkok in August 2008, and the Ambassador had raised it with Prime Ministers Samak, Somchai, and Abhisit, as well as with four Foreign Ministers. It was important that the United States could count on its ally to do the right thing in a case like this. That said, the Ambassador explained we were aware that Bout

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was working every possible channel to secure his release - legal, or otherwise - so that he could return to Russia and avoid extradition. This would be a severe blow to our ties. The U.S. is patient, and understands the long legal procedures in Thailand, but expects that, in the end, those legal procedures will result in Bout's extradition.

¶6. (C) The Crown Prince said he understood, and recommended that we continue to pursue the case with the Prime Minister and relevant cabinet officials. Samak and Somchai would not have been able to focus on the case since "they were too concerned with their own survival." The Abhisit government would be better placed to follow through on the case.

A Relaxed Prince

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¶7. (C) The Crown Prince was very engaged in this rare audience. For a man who is known to have his "off days," this was not one of them. There was no strained effort to make conversation, in contrast to previous meetings, and he was visibly relaxed in the session, particularly after the media cameramen departed the room. At the end of the session, the Crown Prince and his consort brought in their four-year-old son, dressed in an identical suit, tie, and pocket kerchief as his father, and amiably mused about the difficulties of raising a child in the modern royal environment with constant public scrutiny.

JOHN